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Arrogant Narcissism: The Essence of U.S. Foreign Policy

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U.S. leaders routinely intone that the United States stands for a “rules-based international order,” and that Washington has always tried to play its role as benevolent global leader. The reality is decidedly less savory and far more self-centered. Washington’s actual attitude since World War II is one of arrogant national narcissism, and the problem persists in our own era.

Perhaps the most succinct expression of that perspective was Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright’s comment during a February 1998 interview on NBC’s “Today” show. She stated that “we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future.” But that sentiment existed before Albright, and it has continued long after her departure from office.

One detects the same tone in President George H.W. Bush’s 1991 State of the Union Address.

For generations, America has led the struggle to preserve and extend the blessings of liberty. And today, in a rapidly changing world, American leadership is indispensable. Americans know that leadership brings burdens and sacrifices. But we also know why the hopes of humanity turn to us. We are Americans; we have a unique responsibility to do the hard work of freedom. And when we do, freedom works.

In his February 2021 speech to the annual Munich Security Conference, Joe Biden stated: “I speak today as President of the United States at the very start of my administration, and I’m sending a clear message to the world: America is back.” The unmistakable implication was that under President Donald Trump, the United States had neglected, if not forfeited, its role as global leader. In his remarks following the June G7 summit, Biden stressed that “we’re unique as a country.”

The arrogance and narcissism has not been confined to inflated rhetoric on the part of U.S. leaders. It frequently has governed the substance of U.S. policy. One example was how Bill

Clinton's administration addressed the issue of North Korea's nuclear-weapons program in 1994. In his memoirs, Clinton stated that, "I was determined to prevent North Korea from developing a nuclear arsenal, even at the risk of war." Secretary of Defense William Perry later conceded that the administration seriously considered conducting "surgical strikes" against North Korea's embryonic nuclear installations. Fortunately, former President Jimmy Carter convinced Clinton to let him approach Pyongyang and conduct talks to resolve the crisis peacefully. But it was a close call, and at no time did Clinton or his advisers even hint that South Korea's wishes would have a major influence on Washington's decision about launching air strikes. Seoul certainly would not have had a veto over U.S. policy. The same was true of Japan and Washington's other East Asian allies, despite the fallout (figurative and perhaps literal) they might experience from U.S. airstrikes on nuclear facilities.

Such indifference to the wishes of allies regarding high-stakes issues has typified Washington's behavior over the decades. One example is how U.S. officials have worked to torpedo any allied security initiatives that did not leave the United States clearly in charge. Washington's smothering stance was on full display during an episode in the late 1990s. France and a few other European countries sought to create the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), which would have purely European military capabilities and operate outside the NATO framework, likely through the European Union (E.U.). Indeed, the maverick allies proposed creating a Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) under European control to implement the ESDP.

U.S. leaders reacted like scalded cats. Some strident objections bordered on hysteria. Speaking to the NATO defense ministers meeting in Brussels in December 2000, Secretary of Defense William Cohen warned that if the E.U. created a defense capability outside of NATO, the Alliance would become "a relic of the past." Officials in the subsequent George W. Bush administration exhibited a similar attitude. In October 2003, Nicholas Burns, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, sharply criticized the E.U.'s plan to develop an independent military capacity. Burns branded that effort as "one of the greatest dangers to the transatlantic community."

John Bolton, who would become a senior policy official in Bush's administration, and later, national security advisor in the Trump administration, especially excoriated the RRF as "a dagger pointed at NATO's heart." (It is a phrase he used again earlier this year regarding any independent European defense initiatives). Under Bolton's influence, the Trump administration displayed intense hostility when French President Emmanuel Macron revived the idea of creating an E.U. army.

Although U.S. administrations, both Republican and Democratic, routinely have complained that the European countries underinvest in their defense and fail to accept sufficient "burden-sharing," they have been just as adamant in opposing independent security initiatives by those allies. U.S. officials want greater burden-sharing, but only within NATO where the United States calls most of the shots. In other words, they seek greater European efforts to help execute U.S. foreign policy objectives.

Sometimes, the attitudes of U.S. officials do not just betray arrogant indifference to the wishes of America's supposed security partners, they convey disdain. Such contempt came through clearly

when the European allies sought to manage the turmoil unleashed by Yugoslavia's unraveling in the early 1990s. One anonymous but high-level official in George H. W. Bush's administration reportedly dismissed such ambitions with the sneering observation that the Europeans "could not organize a three-car motorcade if their lives depended on it." Two decades later, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, when told that some members of the European Union might object to aspects of Washington's campaign to undermine Ukraine's elected, pro-Russia government, responded in a more pithy fashion: "F*** the E.U.!"

Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt, once reportedly contended that her father was such an egotist that he "always wanted to be the corpse at every funeral, the bride at every wedding and the baby at every christening." The hubristic officials in charge of U.S. foreign policy seek a similar status for the United States. They always want Washington to be in charge, even when that policy increases both the financial burdens on and the military risks to the American people. A far more modest foreign policy is long overdue.

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